

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 31

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW
July/August 1982

The government

The Reagan administration is stonewalled
on the intelligence beat
except, of course, when leaks serve

by JAY PETERZELL

The most rigorous paradox is Epimenides' confession "I am lying": if true, it is false; and if false, it is true.

The Reagan paradox is less rigorous but more troubling, at least to many reporters who cover foreign policy and other beats that frequently involve access to national security information. The paradox is that the Reagan administration has placed unprecedented restrictions on press access to intelligence information but is at least as willing as past administrations to use leaks and selective declassification to support its foreign policy. The result is that security-minded officials have released information — on Libyan threats to assassinate President Reagan, for example — that reveals intelligence sources and methods but which, like Epimenides, leaves us dizzy about the truth.

Attempts to use the press to influence policy are, of course, not limited to the intelligence community. But the CIA or the National Security Council differs from the U.S. Forest Service in that information obtained from the former often cannot be independently confirmed by reporters. It may come from an unreliable or unevaluated source; it may be a conclusion based on secret evidence that does not fully support it; it may have been released as part of an intelligence operation of which the press is unaware. As one *Washington Post* reporter who has "dealt fairly extensively with the CIA" put it, intelligence information is difficult for journalists because "it is less exposed to the cut and thrust of public dialogue about its accuracy and its origin, and it's not so readily accessible to checks on its authenticity."

The Libyan hit-squad story is a good case in point. On October 8, 1981, the *New York Post* carried a "Jack Anderson Exclusive" reporting that the National Security Agency had intercepted a phone call between Libya and Ethiopia shortly after the U.S. shot down two Libyan jets over the Gulf of Sidra last August. During the phone call, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi threatened to have Reagan assassinated.

"It was not an adverse leak [i.e. it was not hostile to the administration]," Anderson associate Dale Van Atta recalled. "The source was an NSA source." The story was also covered by *Newsweek* and *NBC Magazine*; then it disappeared.

On November 23, *Newsweek* breathed new life into the story after State Department correspondent John Walcott learned that officials now thought Qaddafi had dispatched death squads, armed with bazookas, grenade launchers, and SAM-7 missiles, that were gunning for Reagan and other top U.S. officials. For the next three weeks the press was filled with lurid accounts of countersniper teams on the White House roof, nationwide searches for assassination squads, and even the involvement of the dread Venezuelan terrorist "Carlos." The source of the government reports was later learned to be a former Lebanese terrorist who walked into an American embassy in mid-November and claimed to have heard Qaddafi give the "kill" order the preceding month.

It was on December 6, only a few hours after Qaddafi had dismissed the reports as "big lies," that the State Department for the first time went on record as saying that "we have strong evidence that Qaddafi has been plotting the murder of American officials. . . ." The next day Reagan added: "We have the evidence and [Qaddafi] knows it." On December 10, the president called on some 2,000 U.S. oil company employees and other Americans to leave Libya — a request the administration had made repeatedly and unsuccessfully over the past year to clear the way for economic and military actions reportedly designed to culminate in Qaddafi's downfall.

As soon as most Americans had reluctantly agreed to leave Libya, the hit-squad threat evaporated. "The risk is diminished some," Senate majority leader Howard Baker told *The Washington Post* on December 16. FBI Director William Webster, who had been skeptical all along, said in January that as far as he could tell no Libyan assassins had ever entered the United States. Evidence presented at classified briefings during the height of the crisis "got flimsier and flimsier," a member of the Senate Intelligence

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